



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on Children and Small Arms and Light Weapons

Board of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons,
meeting in Stockholm, September 1-2, 2007

The impact of small arms and light weapons (SALW) on children is evident. According to the 2006 report of the independent expert for the United Nations study on violence against children, “where guns and other weapons are available, fights often lead to severe injuries and death.” Indeed, few question the vulnerability of children as victims of armed violence. However, there lies a considerable gap in engagement with regard to targeting children’s demand for SALW, in violent contexts and where violence prevention mechanisms are lacking.

Since its inception, the Forum has recognized the problems surrounding the involvement of children and youth in armed groups, as child soldiers or participants in organized crime, and has championed tackling the problem at its root causes. The Final Declaration of the Annual Assembly in Mexico City, signed in 2005, called on members to support policies and legislative measures which would rehabilitate and reintegrate SALW-affected children. That same year a partnership was formed between Save the Children Latin America and the Forum to develop work in this regard, beginning with a joint study to mainstream a child’s rights perspective in the work of the Forum.

Prohibitive measures at the international level centre on the discussion of age limits on the civilian possession of firearms. Persuasive measures like risk education have typically been implemented as an awareness raising tool highlighting the dangers associated with SALW. Yet, according to the South Eastern European Small Arms Clearinghouse (SEESAC) while such an approach works with adults, little to no evidence suggests its usefulness with children, who are unable to rationalize the mortal nature of gun use in the same way.

Parliamentary capacities of legislation, monitoring and campaigning, place Forum members in a key position to establish better prohibitive and persuasive mechanisms which work to prevent and combat the impact of SALW on children. Parliamentarians are integral actors in reinforcing inter-institutional measures, bringing together a wide-range of actors, from churches to parents associations, and so on. However, the most important stakeholder involved is the child and close cooperation with child-based organisations, including the UN children’s agency (UNICEF), Save the Children, and others, is essential to incorporating the child’s rights perspective.

Several UN instruments guide the Forum's policy standpoint on children and SALW. The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures should be taken to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence and injury; and supports children's participation and consultation in the process.

UNICEF is the lead UN agency for child protection, including protection from all forms of violence against children and has proposed a concept of the 'Protective Environment Framework', to ensure that governments address the underlying systems that fail to protect children. The Framework sets out eight elements that determine children's protection from violence, exploitation and abuse. This child protection approach is more relevant than 'quick fix' awareness and education programmes on small arms.

The Geneva Declaration promotes a comprehensive approach to armed violence reduction issues, recognizing the different situations, needs and resources of men and women, boys and girls, as reflected in the provisions of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1612. To ensure that armed violence prevention and reduction initiatives target specific risk factors and groups, programmes must provide non-violent alternative livelihoods for individuals and communities.

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Stockholm, on September 1-2 2007;

Aware that children are a group particularly exposed to violence with firearms, either as victims or perpetrators, wherefore their situation has to inform all work directed at preventing and repressing armed violence;

Expresses its unconditional commitment to the alleviation of the suffering that small arms and light weapons inflict upon children;

Asks every actor to combine both persuasive and prohibitive measures when targeting children in relation to small arms and light weapons, putting emphasis on assuring that such objects are not diverted to children and that communities and other stakeholders are aware of the risks thereof;

Reiterates, therefore, its commitment to promote local voices and solutions for the reduction of armed violence, since local knowledge and community based approaches are key for finding durable solutions to problems related to children and SALW;

Convinced, also, that children should have an own voice, and that their experiences and wishes be included, when measures concerning SALW and their implications on children are adopted;

Urges legislators, for the purposes of furthering a culture of peace and keeping children and future generations from being exposed to armed violence, to impose an 18 year minimum age minimum on the purchase, possession and use of firearms and in recruitment to military service;

Draws attention to the special needs of three groups of children: child soldiers, children in organized armed violence, and girls in post-conflict and recovery situations;

Demands that when instruments on SALW or with relevance to SALW are established, such as the Arms Trade Treaty initiative, the “Child Soldiers Protocol” be unconditionally observed and specifically that disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration schemes and processes are tailored to meet the needs of both male and female young combatants, wherefore amongst other Resolution 1325 should also serve to guide such schemes and processes;

Embraces the idea of considering a similar international regulation, as that which governs child soldiers, also for children in organized armed violence, since this is a particularly worrying feature of criminality susceptible to be accompanied by public stigmatization of children in such groups, thereby posing long-term threats to social cohesion;

Proposes that further research on the linkages between children and SALW be conducted, for a better understanding of the issue and to facilitate the identification of best practices and subsequent shaping of comprehensive policies;

Recommends that macro-economic indicators be developed that reflect the socio-economic impact of SALW-problems related to children, so as to set correct public spending priorities, convinced amongst other that societies stand to gain from directing resources towards preventive measures;

Urges the Members of the Forum and fellow Parliamentarians dedicated to the reduction of armed violence, to make use of all parliamentary tools available to them – such as legislation initiatives, oversight measures, budget allocations and awareness-raising activities – for assuring that SALW problems related to children are duly attended; and,

Mandates the Secretariat to undertake various activities within the program work of the Forum, in order to considerably raise the profile of the Forum on the issue of children and SALW, amongst other through the development of practical policy tools, capacity-building, reforms of SALW-related legislation, and awareness-raising.

For the Board

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